How U.S. Made Unholy Alliance With the Mafia

By PAUL MESKIL

Fourth of a series

When Fidel Castro threw the American gangsters out of Cuba, they vowed to return—over his dead body.

Their determination to get rid of Castro was shared by many high-placed American officials and this common cause led eventually to an unholy alliance between the CIA and the mob. The strange story of CIA agents and Mafia mobsters plotting together against Castro was pieced together from interviews with police, federal agents, ex-agents and underworld sources.

Meyer Lansky, the crime syndicate's financial genius, and Santo Trafficante, Mafia boss of West Florida and Havana, got out of Cuba immediately after the hasty exit of their benefactor, dictator Fulgencio Batista. The overseers of their gambling casinos remained on the island, nervously waiting for the axe to fall.

"I was in touch with all the casino owners and operators in Havana," said Frank Sturgis, who was Castro's casino inspector during this period. "Fidel ordered me to close all the casinos for 10 days. The owners got the hint. They knew he was preparing to shut them down permanently, which he did.

"They were very, very mad. Those casinos were worth $100 million a year to the American crime syndicate. Every important mob boss in the United States had points (percentages) in the Cuban casinos. Each point was worth $20,000 to $100,000.

"Lansky and Trafficante were the top men in Cuban gambling. Lansky had direct business dealings with Batista. Trafficante had several casinos, including the Sans Souci."

Sans Souci partners

His Sans Souci partners included Norman Rothman of Miami Beach and the notorious Mannarino brothers, Gabriel and Sam, Mafia chiefs in Pittsburgh. Rothman and the Mannarinos tried to stop the Castro steamroller in 1958 by smuggling a planeload of arms — stolen from a National Guard armory in Ohio — to anti-Castro forces in Cuba.

According to police and federal sources, Rothman was high up in the Cuban crime syndicate and shared his rackets profits with Batista's brother-in-law, Gen. Robert Fernandez Miranda.

Rothman returned to Florida soon after the Castro coup and, with his Cuban partners, bought the Biltmore Hotel in Miami Beach, the sources said.

SECRETS OF THE CIA

The hotel's most elegant suite, on the top floor overlooking the ocean, was made ready for Batista, but he chose the cooler climes of the Dominican Republic, Portugal and Madeira.

Sturgis was on friendly terms with several gambling racketeers, including Hyman Levine, a Lansky mobster who ran Havana's Comodoro casino. One evening, during a casual conversation, Levine observed that it "would be worth a million" to the syndicate to get rid of Castro. Sturgis didn't rise to this bait and Levine changed the subject.

It popped up again a few weeks later while Castro was in New York during a whirlwind tour of North and South America.

Fidel and his entourage stayed at the Statler-Hilton, where Sturgis registered under his real name and Cuban military rank, Capt. Frank Fiorini.

Frank was in his room one evening when he received a phone call from a detective captain on duty in the lobby as part of a heavy security detail. No

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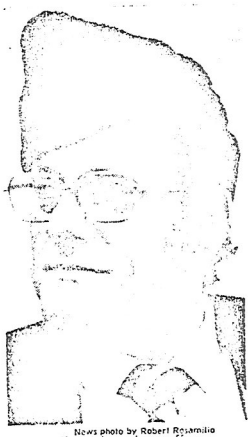

News photo by Robert Rosamilia

Sturgis: The mob made an offer.

AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE: CIA AND THE MOB

Surrounded by his soldiers, Castro enters Havana in triumph after ousting the Batista government. UPI Photo

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visitors were allowed on the Castro floor without special permission.

"There's a guy here to see you," the cop reported. "He says he's your uncle."

"Send him up," Frank replied.

The short, pot-bellied man who arrived a few minutes later looked more like a godfather than an uncle. Frank recognized him as a member of the Havana gambling mob. Coming straight to the point, the hood offered Frank $100,000 to kill Castro.

"I'm not for hire," Frank said, ending the conversation.

When he returned to Havana a few days later, he reported the offer to his CIA contacts at the American Embassy.

Sturgis had no further contact with the gangster who approached him in New York, but someone in the intelligence hierarchy decided that the CIA and the syndicate should join forces against Castro. The go-between picked for this project reportedly was Norman Rothman.

"Rothman was in touch with several CIA agents," a former agent told The News. "They had many meetings concerning assassination plots against Castro."

Rothman, in turn, discussed the matter with his peers. Among those who took part in these secret parleys, reliable sources said, were Santo Trafficante of Tampa; Sam Mannarino of Pittsburgh; Salvatore (Sally Burns) Granello and Charles (Charlie the Blade) Tourine, both of New York, and John (Don Giovanni) Roselli of Las Vegas.

Granello, a member of the Vito Genovese crime family, had run casinos in Cuba and bossed a major bookmaking operation on Manhattan's East Side. Tourine, an associate of New Jersey mob chieftains Ruggerio (Richie the Boot) Boiardo and Gerardo (Jerry) Catena, also had operated Havana casinos.

Several suggestions were made for Castro's demise. One was to send for Gaspare Magaddino, a one-man Murder Inc. who killed more than 50 people in various parts of the world before he was blown away by a shotgun blast in Brooklyn in 1970. A Sicilian Mafioso, Magaddino had lived in South America and Cuba, where he performed lethal chores for Trafficante prior to the Castro coup. He knew Havana well and was a perfect choice for the assassination assignment, but he either declined or wasn't offered the contract.

The mob and the CIA finally gave it to Roselli, reputed Mafia boss of Las Vegas, federal sources said.

A dapper, gray-haired man who calls himself a Hollywood movie producer and is a benevolent patron of Vegas showgirls, Roselli reportedly was introduced to CIA agents in 1960 by a Howard Hughes executive who formerly worked for the FBI. Then, federal sources said, Roselli agreed to recruit a death squad to go to Cuba hunting Castro.

Deprived of it's Havana casinos, U.S. mob joined CIA in series of plots to kill Castro, using everything from poison to dynamite

Money from CIA

The CIA was to supply money, weapons, and transportation.

Roselli flew to Miami in March, 1961, and held separate conferences with CIA agents and Trafficante on the Castro project.

Roselli volunteered to accompany CIA-financed missions to Cuba, the federal sources said. One of these expeditions reportedly landed an execution squad that attempted but failed to hit Castro. On another occasion, the crew of Roselli's launch fought a running gunfight with a Cuban patrol boat.

Columnist Jack Anderson reported that CIA agents gave Roselli some poison capsules which he passed along to a Cuban who was related to Castro's chef. The chef was to put the poison in Castro's food. The sources interviewed by the News confirmed that at least one attempt was made to poison Castro.

An American who was active in the anti-Castro underground in Cuba at the time said "enough poison to kill 10 people" was dropped in a glass of malted milk sent to Castro's suite in the Havana Hilton in 1961.

"Castro ordered a chocolate milk every afternoon and the same waiter always brought it to his room," he said. "When the waiter came in with the poisoned malt, he was shaking so hard that he almost dropped the tray.

"Castro said, 'What's wrong with you? The waiter said, 'I don't know; maybe I got a fever.' Castro had him arrested and had the drink analyzed. Chemists found the poison right away."

In early 1961, a more elaborate assassination attempt was directed by a well-financed American who arrived in Havana soon after the Castro takeover and lived there until security police accused him of working for the CIA and plotting to murder Castro.

Working with anti-Castro Cuban military officers, the American planted several sticks of dynamite under the garage floor of a 20-story apartment building where a number of Castro aides and Communist-bloc diplomats lived with their families.

"Castro came to the apartment house every two weeks to see one of his adjutants," one of the plotters said. "He always arrived in the afternoon, on the same day of the week.

"He would drive in with his bodyguards and park his car in the space reserved for him. We timed his visits. It always took at least five minutes for him to get into the garage, out of the car and into the freight elevator that took him upstairs where he wanted to go.

"We had a line of four men. One would signal from a nearby roof when Castro's car started into the garage. The signal would be passed on. Then a couple of guys would hit the plunger of an electronic detonating device. The detonator was in a hotel near the apartment house.

"We would have blown him to dust.

"The night before it was to happen, the guys (the Cuban plotters) had a final meeting to go over the details. Nobody outside our group knew about the dynamite, but a friend of theirs in G-2 (Castro's intelligence service) found out about the meeting and reported it. The G-2 came looking for them.

"They were in an apartment miles away from the place where the dynamite was. The G-2 raided the meeting and everybody started running all over the place."

One of the plotters, a young military officer named Jesus Casais, shot it out with the raiders and killed two of them before he was slain by a motorcycle cop. Three other conspirators, all rebel officers who had fought with Castro in the Sierra Maestra, were captured and taken to G-2 headquarters. They escaped a few hours later, with the help of friends in the intelligence service, and found refuge in the Uruguayan Embassy.

"Castro never found out about the dynamite," said the source who disclosed the plot to The News. "It's probably still there, under the garage floor."

Intelligence sources told this reporter that the CIA sent an execution squad into Oriente Province in November 1962 to ambush Castro near Santiago di Cuba as he drove to a memorial service for his fallen guerrillas.

Snipers hid along road

Snipers hid among trees and bushes lining the road to the cemetery where the service was to be held. On the morning of the scheduled ceremony, a motorcade of five jeeps approached the graveyard. The first jeep was full of soldiers. In the second jeep, a tall, bearded man sat next to the driver. He was wearing sunglasses and his fatigue cap was pulled down to his eyes.

Machineguns and rifles sprayed the second jeep with bullets, killing the driver and his passenger, who turned out to be Castro's lookalike bodyguard, Capt. Alfredo Gamonal. The assassins escaped. So did Fidel, who had prudently taken another route to the cemetery.

The CIA plots against Castro began in 1960, during the Eisenhower administration and continued through the Kennedy and Johnson years, causing President Johnson to observe to an aide that "we're running a damned Murder, Inc. in the Caribbean."

In 1967, the Immigration and Naturalization Service began deportation proceedings against Don Giovanni Roselli, claiming he was brought to this country illegally from Italy.

In 1969, soon after President Nixon took office, government lawyers argued in court that Roselli should not be deported because he had performed unspecified "valuable service to the national security." Roselli was not deported.

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